

## **Went to a Garden Party**

### *Genesis 2:3, 8-15; Esther 1:1-12*

Last month, I told you, somewhat tongue in cheek, that Chris Ko, our pastoral intern from some years ago, was to blame for the 13 month sojourn we all just took through the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews. Because, years ago, Chris challenged me to try to preach it and I finally got up the courage last year. So today I'm going to put my tongue in the other cheek and tell you that whatever time we spend in the Old Testament Book of Esther you can blame on my son, Andrew. Because for Christmas this year, my Andrew gave me an 800 page history of modern Iran, a country we know from the Bible as Persia. I think the kid wants to expand the old man's horizons.

So as of Friday, I was 369 pages into Andrew's Christmas present, and I have to be honest, I'm struggling! I'm just holding on in this book because Persia and the Persians are different. The Iranians are different from us today and Persia was different back then, some 500 years before Christ when God's people just hung in there, waiting for the day they'd be free to go home to the Promised Land and get away from all the danger and strangeness that was Persia. So it shouldn't surprise us that Esther, the one book of the Bible where all the action takes place in Persia, is different from all the other books God's people wrote during the centuries while they waited for Christ.

For starters, Esther is the one book in the Bible where God is not seen or heard. God isn't even mentioned in Esther. Yet right from the get-go I'm going to tell you that God's presence, God's movement, God's mercy and justice can be found on every page of the book that tells Esther's story. He's there alright. He just decided to go incognito. So one of the features of this book is that nothing and no one is what they appear to be when you first see them or when it first happens. Before he's done, God is going to use everything and everyone in this book for an unseen purpose.

So we'll start with the first person mentioned in the book, a man whom we know today as Xerxes, who is identified in the first verse of Esther as that great Persian suzerain or emperor "*who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.*" All the way from central Asia to east Africa! Now, normally in the biblical universe being the pagan ruler of an empire obtained by brutal conquest would make you a bad guy, but the first counterintuitive fact I'm going to assert is that the Persian emperors, beginning with Cyrus, were generally not bad guys in God's view. Because our God is a surprising individual. He doesn't think like we think. He doesn't hold our prejudices.

It was Isaiah who first prophesied, more than a century before there ever was a Persian empire, that God would anoint a man named Cyrus to liberate God's people from the Babylonian Exile to return home and build a temple and settle in God's country as God's people again. It's strange because Cyrus the Persian appears in Isaiah's prophecy looking more like a savior than a pagan

tyrant. In fact in Isaiah 45, verse one, Isaiah describes Cyrus by name as the Lord's "anointed", literally the Lord's "Christ". So for a moment in Israel's history, Cyrus the Persian became Israel's Messiah, Israel's Christ.

Not in the sense that Cyrus the Persian got anywhere close to being much like Jesus. Rather in the sense that Cyrus in his own confused, fallen way did for God's people things that Jesus would fulfill in technicolor 500 years later. Which shouldn't surprise us because the Bible routinely pictured Israel's confused, fallen kings as forerunners for Christ. David, the adulterer, was the Christ in his day, pushing Israel's boundaries out so that they resembled the boundaries of Eden in Genesis from our Call to Worship.

Solomon, the idolater, was the Christ in his day, building a sanctuary with walls and pillars and gold furniture and vessels so rich and lavish that the temple evoked memories of God and humanity together in the Garden just like Eden in our Call to Worship from Genesis. So here in Isaiah's prophecy, Cyrus the Persian, pagan and ignorant though he was, became the Christ in that moment and for that moment when he vanquished Israel's enemies and set God's people on a path to the home and sanctuary where God waited for them. Which is exactly what Christ does for us today when we give our hearts to him.

And so here I'm going to make the case that the Book of Esther picks up where Isaiah left off by offering us Xerxes as a confused and fallen forerunner of Christ, that royal bridegroom who prepares a sanctuary garden as a place to call and love and honor humanity as his bride and co-regent. There's a long and a short to this story and today I'm going to have to give you the short. The point of Esther's first chapter is that Xerxes, upon becoming king, sets himself on a path very similar to the path God took in Genesis at the original creation. In other words, in Esther's first chapter, Xerxes was like God who at the moment of creation was confronted with a world that was, in the words of Genesis, "*without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.*"

And the book of Genesis takes us through a six day process where the Almighty draws the lines and boundaries and makes the distinctions and provisions that allow the physical universe to have rhyme and reason and sense and government. And the process concludes with God making us, humanity, "*male and female...in his image*". He made us and appointed us as a race to "*...fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion...over every living thing that dwells on the face of the earth*".

And it's only after providing for the organization and government of the physical universe that God declares the whole creation "*very good*". And he proceeds into a seventh day where the Almighty "*rests*", not in the sense that he's a union guy who has a scheduled break, but in the sense that God is a king who has conquered and ordered an empire and who now can take his throne and begin to rule.

And it's after the seventh day, in Genesis 2, that we read about the elaborate preparation God makes for us, humanity, because together we are the bride, the queen, the co-regent with whom God intends to rule the heavens and the earth. So we read in our Call to Worship that God set up for humanity a sanctuary garden between the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia and the waters of the Nile in East Africa and we read that the garden God gave us was a rich place full of all the gold and jewels that an ancient king might want in his treasury.

And we read that God appointed us, humanity, as a co-regent to "*work and guard*" the garden in his name and for his purposes. And then we read in Esther's first chapter where Xerxes the Persian goes through pretty much the same exercise, all kinds of fanfare and elaborate pageantry and preparation that leads to a seven day festival in a palace garden loaded, just like Eden, with gold and silver and jewels and plenty and abundance. There were quantities of wine comparable to what Jesus provided at the wedding party in Cana of Galilee.

Can we talk for a moment about alcohol? Because modern Christians are prejudiced against ancient pagan tyrants, we have wanted to turn Xerxes' wedding feast into some kind of Animal House frat party. I taught it that way years ago when we did Esther in Bible Study and I was wrong. But there is a very real danger motivating our prejudice. You want to blow up your family? You want to ruin some relationships? Get everybody together and all liquored up and see what happens. The Bible warns against it and we ought to respect and guard against the dangers of alcohol abuse.

But that is almost certainly not what is going on here in Esther's first chapter. Xerxes is not promoting alcohol abuse here any more than Christ was promoting alcohol abuse at Cana in Galilee. When it says that Xerxes' heart was "*glad with wine*" when he sent his servants to summon his queen to enthrone and honor her, the text is telling us that the king was in a state of mind to love and honor his bride in her moment of honor. Why do I think that?

To the best of my research this phrase "*glad with wine*" appears two other times in the Old Testament. Once, in 2 Samuel 13, the phrase is incidental to a story, but the context is sinister. But the other passage where the phrase "*glad with wine*" appears is not sinister at all. In Ecclesiastes 9, Solomon teaches us about the things God gives us to make life joyful and bearable and he writes this: "*Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart, for God has already approved what you do.*" And a verse later he goes on to say: "*Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your fragile life that God has given you under the sun.*" And I believe that this is Xerxes state of mind and sincere intention when he summons his queen for her moment of honor.

So the seventh day and all the honor and affection that God and Xerxes both wanted to lavish on their bride and co-regent ran into the same bruising ending. For in Genesis 3, God entered the garden he prepared for his bride and called to his beloved, "*Where are you?*". And our answer to the king who loved us? "*I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.*" The encounter went on, but you and I know how we ended up in

the weeds hiding from God. We listened to a Serpent who told us that the love of our Bridegroom was not sincere and could not be trusted and we began to fend for ourselves apart from, over and against what God taught us and commanded us to be.

And the point of Esther's first chapter is that the Fall makes us, you and I together like Vashti. You and I together were brought into the world by a God who loves and wants us, but some-thing has happened in our minds and hearts that prevents us from answering his call and responding with faith and gratitude to his love. And love has never been simple or straight-forward or easy ever since. So in Genesis 3, after the Fall, the world goes into a tailspin and here in Esther the betrayal and defection of Vashti sends the story of Esther into a swirl as sinister and complicated as any story that can be found in Scripture.

Because in this book, everybody has to operate by faith, in the dark. God is not seen or heard from or even mentioned as the terrible events of a Persian holocaust loom over God's people. The Book of Esther can become strange and incomprehensible unless we understand from the get-go that it is a love story, that the real issue in all this swirl is whether the Bride-groom will find a bride and whether she will trust him through the complexity and danger she has to work through before his love and goodness can be finally be seen. The question behind what happens at every stage in this book is, "Does Xerxes care?" And through much of the book it appears that he might not!

But if we understand that loving and trusting Bridegroom is the central issue, then this book and our own lives will begin to make sense. Which is why, in Mark's gospel chapter 12, when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, he didn't tell us to go here or there, to do this or to be that. He taught us about love, "*The greatest commandment is this:*" Jesus said, "*You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.*" *The second is like it:*" he said, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

It is love for the Bridegroom who calls us and love for the people who share that calling that will bear us through twists and turns that otherwise would seem too much to grasp and bear. When life gets dark, loving and trusting the Bridegroom is what sorts things out. Because Christ does care.